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ABSTRACT

In order to move away from the prescriptive methods of teaching English that only make students more self-conscious and reticent in their language use, teachers should introduce word games, relevant issues, and exciting strategies to instill in their students the love of language. This article presents five exercises developed to encourage students to look further into our language's history and to develop competency in its use. Exercises are based on the following aspects of language: etymology, including the history of words and phrases that have come about through misconceptions; the study of euphemisms, which can develop an appreciation for the nuances of language; sex differences in language and their implications for our culture; the importance of grammar, which is presented through entertaining, yet educational, questions; and palindromes, or words spelled the same both forwards and backwards. (CC)

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The Application of Linguistics in the Classroom

Dr. Kevin M. McCarthy

English teachers in the past have often tended to spend a great deal of time on either unessential or irrelevant material, e.g. the shall-will distinction, the farther-further difference, etc. A recent Newsweek article entitled "Just Between You and I" (2/13/78, p. 15) continues this trend in emphasizing the difference between media and medias, the bureaucratic gobbledygook of finalize and conceptualize, and the misuse of adverbs like hopefully. I tend to disagree with such would-be linguistic trend-setters as they urge their prescriptive, eighteenth-century, Latin-based syntax on English speakers today; the Edwin Newmans of the world would make us all tongue-tied or so self-conscious about our language use that we would become even more reticent--for fear that we might be splitting an infinitive or ending a sentence with a preposition. Our language is just too rich and exciting for it to become bogged down by meaningless, antiquated notions of what is right and wrong. This is not to say that "anything goes" in language use; it is to say that we should avoid the example of the French and Spanish, who have set up a special Academy to decide what is right and wrong in their languages.

Over the past few years I have developed a number of exercises and examples that are meant to encourage our students to look further into our language history and to develop competency in its use in order to become more adept at using English. These exercises include punctuation, syntax, etymology, palindromes, acronyms, word games, etc. Their purpose is to make

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the learning of English exciting and fun--as it should and can be.

1. Etymology. The first exercise I want to mention deals with etymology or the history of words and phrases. Examples would include the fact that highway refers to the importance of a road, not its elevation; that assassin goes back to an Arabic word meaning 'smokers of hashish.' This would seem to be a strange derivation since smoking hashish makes one lethargic and disoriented--hardly the ingredients for one to go out and kill a political leader. The fact of the matter is that these hired killers in olden times did not call themselves "assassins," but rather "killers"; they got their bad epithet from those who lived near them, people who despised these hired killers.

There are also etymologies of phrases that our students are familiar with, e.g. the sports cheer "Two bits, four bits...." This comes from the division of the Spanish paper dollar of the West Indies into eight parts or "bits," each bit being worth 12 1/2¢. Thus two bits were worth 25¢, etc. This division of the dollar into eight parts also gives us the origin of the term "pieces of eight." Several books containing these etymologies are: Cecil Hunt, Word Origins: The Romance of Language (N.Y.: Philosophical Library, 1962); Charles E. Funk, Heavens to Betsy and Thereby Hangs a Tale (N.Y.: Warner, 1972). I usually present my classes one etymology a class session; it can make a linguistic presentation interesting and informative--two traits that are often lacking in our classrooms.

In this same general area there are the many so-called "mistakes" in our language, words and phrases that have come about through misconceptions. For example, take the word nickname; this word comes from the phrase an ekename

'an other name.' Through frequent use the n of the indefinite article an became attached to the ekename so that today we have the word nickname. Other examples of this, where the n of the indefinite article became attached to the following noun, are newt and napkin. Examples of where the n of the noun became attached to the preceding indefinite article a to form a new word are umpire and adder; in the first example the word came from Middle French noumpere; in Middle English a noumpere became, through frequent use, an umpire. Such changes are natural to a living, used language. Students are usually fascinated by such "mistakes"; I will often assign one student to report on each such change and give a five-minute report to the class.

2. Euphemisms. All languages tend to use pleasant-sounding phrases for terms that are deemed low-class or inappropriate. Today in our country, for example, people who spend $60,000 or more for a house would rather not live on a "street"; instead they would prefer "parkway," "crescent," "road," "circle," "lane," etc. Subdevelopments will usually try to outdo themselves in the concoction of romantic, alluring street names. One of my students did a paper for me on the street-naming of a new development in south Florida; he did such a fine job that the Miami Herald published it, which seemed to have been all this particular student needed to convince him to go into writing.

Some interesting papers can be done in high school and college on the use of euphemisms in our society, for example in the names we give to bathrooms or pregnancy or bodily functions. Death is a particularly good area for this study; our society has evolved dozens of terms to describe dying, killing, the cemetery, predictions of death, etc. A very fine article on this subject is found in the October 1936 issue of American

Speech. For example, figurative expressions for death include: The lamp of life has flickered out; his clock has run down; he bit the dust; he has breathed his last; he has gone to his reward. Slang expressions include: He kicked the bucket; he was placed in cold storage; he kissed the dust; he went home feet first; he went pfft. Terms from work and recreation include: He stopped a bullet; he answered the last roll call; he fired his last shot; he died with his boots on; he pulled in at the last terminal. Terms for the cemetery include: The bone orchard; the marble city; the boneyard. Predictions of death include: Your number is up; you are on your last legs; you have no more chance than a rabbit; one more clean shirt is all you'll need; you have one foot in the grave and another on a banana peel; we'll be looking at each other, and one of us won't know it. These examples from this article are just a few of the many that our students can come up with, from preachers, sermons, newspapers, etc. My own students in Florida are fascinated when I tell them that the romantic-sounding Key West actually comes from a Spanish phrase, Cayo hueso, which means 'bone island,' because of the many human bones found on the island after Indian raids.

An exercise on such expressions would include the instructions of writing down a euphemism for each of the following less-pleasant phrases; I have included the euphemism in parentheses: white weasel fur (ermine), blind (sightless), military retreat (strategic withdrawal), coffin (casket), concentration camp (relocation center), garbage (refuse), stool pigeon (informed source), old people (senior citizens). Another exercise includes the writing down of unfavorable phrases for euphemisms: quick-witted (smart alecky), self-assured (conceited), firm (muleheaded), sensitive (touchy), youthful (immature), brave (rash). Another exercise includes completing a paradigm: I am..., you are..., he is....

I am slender; you are thin; he is scrawny.

I am modest; you are (shy); he is (mousy).

I am dignified; you are (reserved); he is (stiff-necked).

I am thrifty; you are (miserly); he is (tight).

Such exercises begin to make our students appreciate the nuances of language, that so-called synonyms often have connotations that make them pejorative or slanted in one direction or another.

3. Sex differences in language. Another interesting topic and one that seems particularly relevant today is the issue of whether men and women use a different language. Research by Robin Lakoff, a distinguished linguist from the University of Michigan, indicates that men and women use different lexical items, for example that a woman is more likely to use such expressions as "Oh, dear," "It's divine," or words such as "cute," "adorable," "precious," "sweet," and "lovely" before almost any noun. This implies that, if a man were to say something like "That really is a precious outfit you have on," one might see some raised eyebrows.

A woman is also more likely to use specialized color terms like mauve, beige, or lavender, whereas a man would use the more general terms: purple, gray, and red. This does not mean that women see more of a color spectrum than men, but only that they have tended to use a different color vocabulary. This is probably due to the fact that women are usually the ones to decide on what colors a room at home will be painted or that they work in such fields as interior decorating.

Dr. Lakoff also points out that women tend to use tag questions more than men, that whereas a woman might say "The weather is terrible today, isn't it?" a man would say "The weather is terrible today." The use of tag

questions is more for corroboration, which may be an indictment on our society that has often tended to put down strong, assertive women.

Finally, the same phrase can be applied to either sex, but often with different meanings. If we say, "She's got great legs," that means something different than if we were to say, "He's got great legs." In the case of the former, it means that she has sexy, sensual, beautiful legs; in the case of the man, it means that he's got strong, athletic legs. There is an ad in Time (8/6/73) that emphasizes this difference; the ad says: "Hire him. He's got great legs." The point of the ad is that women should be judged, as men are, by their ability, not by the shape of their legs.

Discussions and papers by our students that deal with such differences in our language today are interesting, relevant, and stimulating. The students will often bring in examples from current magazines, e.g. of ads and commercials advertising dolls for girls and toy trucks for boys. An awareness of how our language can discriminate against sexes will be of great benefit to the future education of our children and of society.

4. Grammar. There are a number of examples of grammar exercises that can make the study of syntax both entertaining and educational. The following exercises come from Maxwell Nurnberg's Word Play (N.Y.: Dell, 1971) and are meant to show how the different punctuation marks can make a great difference in a sentence:

a. Which soldier has a hollow leg?
   1. The running soldier dropped a bullet in his leg.
   2. The running soldier dropped, a bullet in his leg.

b. Which will require a lot of postage?
   1. Shall I stick the stamps on myself?
   2. Shall I stick the stamps on, myself?

c. Both are table manners, but which is harder to do?
   1. Do not break your bread or roll in your soup.
   2. Do not break your bread, or roll in your soup.

d. Which is a full apology?
   1. Mr. Speaker, I said that the honorable member was a liar. It is true and I am sorry for it.
   2. Mr. Speaker, I said that the honorable member was a liar, it is true, and I am sorry for it.

e. Which may result in an embarrassing situation?
   1. The butler was asked to stand by the door and call the guests names.
   2. The butler was asked to stand by the door and call the guests' names.

f. In which instance does the dog have the upper paw?
   1. A clever dog knows its master.
   2. A clever dog knows it's master.

g. Which Joe is the aquanaut?
   1. Joe assumed divers duties.
   2. Joe assumed divers' duties.

5. Palindromes. The following exercise, which asks you to write down a word that is spelled the same backwards and forwards, is useful for teaching both vocabulary and spelling. I give you the meaning of each palindrome and, in parentheses, the number of letters in each word; I also include the answer in parentheses on the far right.

a. a napkin for a baby (3) - (bib)

b. a respectful term of address for a lady (5) - (madam)

c. a notable achievement (4) - (deed)

d. more blood-colored (6) - (redder)

e. the males and the females (5) - (sexes)

f. one who resuscitates another (7) - (reviver)

g. pertaining to public affairs or to a city (5) - (civic)

h. made wet with dew (5) - (dewed)

i. a belief, dogma, or principle (5) - (tenet)

j. idolized, made a god of (7) - (deified)

k. a small Alaskan boat (5) - (kayak)

l. Dennis and Edna _____. (sinned)

m. A man, a plan, a canal: _____. (Panama)

n. Madam, I'm _____. (Adam)

o. Able was I 'ere _____ _____ _____. (I saw Elba)

These exercises then are meant to make our language teaching more exciting and educational. With more and more of our classroom time being taken up with non-educational tasks such as roll taking, fund raising, pep rallies, yearbook planning, etc. it behooves us English teachers to use our time to the best advantage of our students. We can choose to stick with the old, prescriptive methods of teaching English, or we can begin to branch out and make use of word games, relevant issues, and exciting strategies to instill in our students the love of our language that we teachers have.

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